

Barratt Ministries Challenge

Issue 7

TAKE UP YOUR CROSS - The Cost of Discipleship, Part 2

by Maurice Barratt

In the last issue we began studying the cost of discipleship by looking at Jesus' first command, "Deny Yourself". Now we will focus on the second part of Jesus' statement, "Take up your cross". Jesus had some strange and perplexing words for his disciples. "Take up your cross" - what on earth did they think it meant? And what do we think it means today? Certainly, Christians have many different notions of what "their cross" means.

Take for example, the lady with an unbelieving husband. "He's my cross", she declares. "He ridicules me about my faith, he persecutes me all the time. It makes my life unbearable. I've tried to talk to him, and prayed and prayed, I've been obedient to him and done everything that I should do as a Christian, but it just hasn't done any good. That's my cross".

Or take the young man at work. "It's my boss", he says. "Ever since I came to this job, he's had an unreasonable attitude towards me. He picks on me. I've tried hard to be the Christian, but the situation never changes. I asked God to move him, but he's still here. I asked God to move me, but I'm still here! So I have to conclude that it must be meant to be this way. I have to accept it. It must be my cross".

Then there's the old lady with crippling arthritis. She's had it 20 years. She's been to all the healing evangelists, she's read all the scriptures, she's had faith, she's cried, she's pleaded. Nothing's happened. God seems deaf to her cries. Her only answer is "This is the cross I have to bear".

But I have to tell you that none of these three things are anything to do with the cross. It may be difficult for Christians to realise it, but the cross cannot be to do with our circumstances. All these problems are common to mankind. Non-Christian workers have bosses who harass

them and treat them unfairly. Non-Christians have terrible diseases and disabilities. If those things are "the cross", then millions of non-Christians "take up their cross daily"! So we can't say that our problems and burdens are the cross, because those same circumstances can happen to anybody. All humanity has to cope with it. We can't claim that that's our cross. Our cross is something quite different.

Jesus told his disciples "Take up your cross". That means it is a voluntary decision. If we make a voluntary decision to have arthritis or to marry a violent husband, then we could perhaps claim that these things are our cross. But we don't choose them. They are circumstances that come upon us. We certainly can't say we "take them up".

The Cross - A Death Sentence

Let's go back to our first question. What did the disciples think "the cross" meant? Remember, this was before Jesus was crucified. The disciples didn't associate the cross with Christianity in the way we do, but they knew what it meant. The cross was the Romans' way of executing criminals. And there was an added curse to the death sentence. The ultimate humiliation was that you had to carry the instrument of your own death to the place of execution. So, whenever those disciples saw a man carrying a cross, they immediately knew one thing - that man was going to die. He was on his way to be crucified.

And that's my conclusion. There is only one reason to take up our cross - to go and be crucified. That sounds pretty foreboding! Is Christianity some sort of suicide pact? Jesus, of course, was physically crucified; but when he told his disciples to take up their cross, he wasn't talking about going to physical death. What does it mean, then, for us to be crucified? What sort of death is this?

In the last issue we linked Jesus' words, "Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me", to the world, the flesh and the devil. Denying yourself, we said, is to do with being outwardly different from the world. But taking up our cross is to do with the flesh - with the inner life. It is the flesh, our corrupt, selfish nature, that has to die. Crucifixion is death to self, all our own will, ego, ambitions and desires.

How Can We Crucify Ourselves?

I have good news for you. A man cannot crucify himself. He can lay down on the cross, but how is he going to knock the nails in? He can't do it by himself. Someone else has to do it for him. For that reason, the imagery of crucifixion is a perfect illustration of what dying to self means. Jesus didn't command us to crucify ourselves, only to take up our cross. The point is that we can't kill the flesh. We can only be willing to die. It is God who has to "knock the nails in". Self cannot deal with self. God has to crucify our flesh.

There's a big difference between denying ourselves and taking up our cross. Denying ourselves means living differently from the world in our outward behaviour, lifestyle and conversation. But that's not enough. We must start to change inside as well. The Pharisees were certainly different from the world. They meticulously kept every letter of the law as concerned their outward behaviour. They really did deny themselves. But Jesus cursed them, calling them hypocrites and whitewashed tombs, because they had not changed inside. Their flesh had not been dealt with. Self was alive and well inside them! Jesus exposed their ungodly, selfish hearts. We can so easily be just the same. We can go into a monastery to make sure we live differently from the world, but the problem is that we take the flesh into the monastery with us! And a wise monk pointed out that if you think your problems will be solved once you've shut the world out, you will soon find that you have only isolated yourself with a tribe of devils.

The Secret Life Of A Disciple

The flesh is a more subtle enemy than the world. That's why we have to deny ourselves and deal with the world first. That's the first stage. Now God has to deal with that subtle flesh, the rebellious, deceitful nature inside of us. The flesh is always willing to play the hypocrite and put on a good religious appearance. And as well as deceiving others, we begin to deceive ourselves. We can think that we're something completely different to what we really are. No wonder we can't deal with the flesh ourselves! God has to do it.

But we have to give Him the right to do it. How do we do that? The flesh rules our secret thoughts, our hidden motives, our private life that nobody knows about. Selfish attitudes can rule our inner life, unknown to even our closest friends. We may be possessive, angry, covetous, greedy, full of lustful thoughts and wicked desires. But to everyone else we can appear godly, because we control our anger, and never tell anyone our secret thoughts. This secret life can only be dealt with by another secret life - the "secret life of the disciple" - that is, what you do before God in secret.

Jesus criticized the Pharisees for making prayer, fasting and alms-giving into outward actions, a display of righteous behaviour to the world. He told his disciples a very different way. He said they should pray, fast and give alms - but all in secret. No one else should know. It is a secret life, known only to you and God. God already knows our innermost thoughts. Nothing is hidden from Him. He understands that we are flesh. In secret, we can be open with God, and confess to Him all the things we know about in our inner life, all the wrong attitudes, the way the flesh gets the better of us. We can also ask Him to expose us and show us the things we don't know about - because the flesh is deceitful as well as wicked, and it can often deceive us as well as the people around us. Secret communion with God, time spent alone with Him, secret fasting, secret sacrificial giving, proves to God that we have taken up our cross, that we want to be holy, that we want Him to change us. But we must do these things: you must do your part, or else God won't do His part.

How To Be Holy

Let me ask you two questions. Firstly: Do you want to be holy? I suppose all Christians do. Secondly: Does God want us to be holy? Certainly! So - why are we not holy?! If the Christians in England were holy, revival would come. When Christians change on the inside, that's the beginning of revival. We're good at outward change, and we feel good when we know we've changed outwardly. We feel moral. But often we neglect the inside. And it's only that inner change that is revival. The Sermon on the Mount, if it was practised by Christians, would have a devastating effect outwardly on ourselves, our churches and our nation.

We want to be holy. But wanting is not enough. We have to prove to God that we want to be holy. We can't make ourselves holy. I can't pray for you to be holy. Neither can you pray for me to be holy. Neither can we pray to God to make us holy! It won't work. It doesn't happen like that. We have to prove it to God. That takes action, and action takes time - set apart for secret prayer and secret fasting, money and possessions set apart for secret giving.

These things give God the right to start working in us. What happens when God starts working? Often it's exactly the opposite of what we hoped. We hoped to become better people - but we seem

to become worse. Our thoughts seem worse than ever. Our attitudes are tested by circumstances and trials, pressures and strains - and we fail. We try harder, and the harder we try, the harder we fall! What on earth is happening? Our cover is being blown! We are being exposed. That's what is happening. This is very healthy. We feel useless, broken. We realise we have no power. We have become what Jesus calls "poor in spirit", humbled - the very first beatitude. We hunger for holiness, but we can't achieve it.

But then, in the midst of this darkness, we begin to discover that our attitudes are changing. Out of our brokenness, we are surprised to find that we are changing despite ourselves. We know that we can't do it. So how has it happened? God is changing us. God is at work!

This is how God does His work. We can't expect it to be a pleasant time! Don't expect it to happen in an instant. It all takes time. But God is patient, and if we keep giving Him the right to work, He'll take advantage; and we'll change, and the changes will be real and lasting. Taking up our cross means walking with the cross on our back. Keep walking!

"Let us lay aside every weight ... and run with patience the race that is set before us, looking into Jesus ... who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame." (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Experiences From Life

by Joanna Barratt

LIVING BY FAITH

"Take no thought for your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor yet for your ody, what you shall put on ... behold the fowls of the air ... they don't work but God takes care of them..." (Mt.6:25-26). This "life of faith" always sounded like the answer to every Christian's dream - no need to work for a living because God will provide for all our needs - but it was the most humbling experience I ever remember going through, and I fought hard against it! It's laughable to think that what to most people would have been an enviable situation, caused me tremendous embarrassment. I was 25, I had my own flat, my own car, and I had landed a very exciting job in an advertising agency which gave me opportunities to personally be involved in modelling, beauty contests, fashion shows, etc. Maurice and I had just gone into partnership and were setting up a small recording business which was specifically aimed at Christian artists, with the purpose of helping them to make albums in a Christian environment at a cost that they could afford. Although we looked forward to the day when we could give up our jobs and be solely supported by the business, at that time any profit that came in was paying off bank loans and going towards better equipment for the studio.

“Step Out In Faith”

I remember one morning really struggling in prayer. I'd been experiencing this for a few days, where the heavens seemed like brass, even though I was trying my best to lead a more disciplined and dedicated life, spending 2 hours each morning before work in prayer and Bible reading. But this particular morning the struggle got to me and I felt I couldn't leave things as they were. I told God that I wouldn't budge from my room until He spoke to me. I remember fighting and speaking out loud in tongues, and it was during this time that God gave me a specific vision telling me to “step out in faith” .I knew that God was asking me to leave work because He'd been leading up to it for some weeks now - and this was one particular thing that I didn't want to do. I loved my work, I loved my independence, I loved my freedom. But God was telling me to give all this up and be available for Him. I didn't like it, but I know when God speaks and so that very morning I went into work and handed in my notice. It wasn't a rash decision, it was an act of obedience.

The Blessings Of Obedience

Maurice and I had talked the situation over and we'd decided that I would be given a nominal sum each week from Sharing Records (the name of our company) which would pay for my rent and food. We decided that I had to get rid of the car because this would be too much of a drain on resources. Things went well for a few months. As I was the minister's secretary there was plenty of church work for me to do. Maurice and I also ran coffee mornings in the church, where we continuously showed videos of the previous Sunday's services, and held music concerts. Strangers often wandered in through the doors, had a coffee, and watched a service, giving us a great opportunity to witness and invite them to church meetings. I also began to blitz Manchester with tracts, taking a van load of workers from the church twice a week to different areas, where we would spend 2 hours in the morning giving out tracts, then go to the home of one of the church members for soup and rolls, followed by prayer, and then we would continue to give out tracts for a further 2 hours during the afternoon. This proved to be a tremendous time of blessing and I remember that many of our church members who came out with me were filled with the Holy Spirit and received the gifts of prophecy and vision. My instruction from the Lord to leave work and to live by faith was becoming more and more a blessing to me - until something completely outside my control took place.

The Cost Of Faith

The house where I had my flat had belonged to 2 old bachelor brothers who had lived together all their lives. Their characters were totally different. The strong-minded older brother died and left the younger brother, a very lonely frightened man, alone in the house; and he was looking for a tenant to give him some sense of security. I took over the bottom floor of the house and he had his apartment upstairs, and, knowing his situation, I did my best to befriend him. Everything seemed very pleasant, until his attitude towards me changed and I realised that he had completely misunderstood my actions and had become deeply emotionally involved with me. To put it mildly, I was very frightened to live in the same house as this man, but a married couple, who were close friends, immediately said that I must move in with them. They were very good to me. At that

particular time they had tenants in their house paying rent for the rooms they occupied, but I was given 2 rooms and told that I didn't need to pay any rent. They also said (as I didn't have any money) that I could eat with them as part of their family. Maurice suggested that as I no longer had to pay rent or buy food, Sharing Records would not need to support me financially. So in one fell swoop my independence was totally cut off. There is a vast difference between having money and deciding not to spend it, and having no money and not being able to spend!

An Embarrassing Life

I was in a position where I was dependent on this married couple for everything - and I didn't like it one bit. I knew that they were going through hard times financially and I just felt as though I was an added pressure and burden. I had been given 2 rooms because they knew I had a lot of furniture and was used to plenty of space around me, but I knew that those 2 rooms could have brought in a good rent each week. Their situation was so bad that some weeks I remember them taking pictures from the wall and selling them to raise the rent. Some weeks I would give them articles of mine that could bring in some money when sold. At that time the wife was working one day a week in a second-hand store and she would often come home with articles of clothing for me, because she knew that I couldn't afford to buy clothes myself any longer. Although I appreciated her kindness and consideration, it embarrassed me tremendously, and every time I sat around the table to eat a meal with the family I felt like an intruder, and constantly felt uncomfortable. As soon as the dishes were cleared away I would dash up to my rooms and would stay there for the remainder of the evening - but then this caused problems, because they thought that I didn't want to socialise with them! A few months after I'd moved in with this family, Maurice's 2 sisters invited me share a holiday with them, saying that I didn't need to pay anything because they had taken care of everything. I was in an awful situation where I felt under obligation to everybody.

"You're Ungrateful!"

I decided to have a word with the minister of the church and tell him how I felt, so the next time I went to the office I poured out my heart to him. I was really amazed at his reaction, because instead of being sympathetic and understanding, he told me that I was the most ungrateful person he'd ever come across! I was absolutely shocked at what he said but he continued and told me that God had called me to work for Him full-time and to live by faith, and God had proved the call by providing for me with this family who were prepared to take me on even though I was an added burden on their financial resources. If I hadn't accepted their hospitality and generosity then I would not have been able to work full-time for God, as I was single and couldn't support myself financially. He also reminded me that God could see everything that this married couple were doing, and that one day He would reward them personally for all the efforts they had put into obeying His voice, and that if I was to refuse their kindness now I would be robbing them of a tremendous blessing later.

Vulnerability

I tried hard to defend myself, telling him that it wasn't that I was ungrateful, I just felt as though I was a terrible burden on this family. But he ignored everything I said and told me that I was very proud and very independent, and that God had probably placed me in this situation just so that these characteristics could be dealt with. I have learned that "living by faith" is more than expecting God to supply your material needs - it's becoming completely vulnerable and dependent on God for everything ... and it hurts very much, until we've submitted - at which point it becomes the most carefree, exciting life anyone could hope for!